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FM AMCONSUL KOLKATA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2061
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEIDN/DNI WASHINGTON DC
RHMFIUU/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 2519

UNCLAS KOLKATA 000198

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: COMMUNISTS AGAIN SUFFER LOSSES IN WEST BENGAL'S LOCAL
ELECTIONS AND A WEAKENING OF THEIR POLITICAL BASE

REF: KOLKATA 160

11. (SBU) Summary: On June 29, the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) experienced another serious electoral loss in local elections, with the results from the local, municipal elections. This latest setback, follows bad results in the May panchayat (local government) polls (reftel). Of the 13 municipal bodies that went to polls in the last week, CPM-led Left Front won just 4 to the opposition's 8 victories (one municipality was won by the Forward Bloc). The lead opposition party, Trinamul Congress, wrested 3 municipalities - Guskara, Habra and Midnapore -- directly from the Left, while the Congress captured one -- Dalkhola. In the same 13 constituencies in 2003, the Left had won 9 and the opposition 4. This weakening of the Left's political position in its key West Bengal bastion is significant as it coming at the same that the CPM's national leadership in New Delhi is threatening to bring down the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government over the Indo-U.S. civil nuclear agreement and to force early national parliamentary elections. West Bengal CPM leadership is reportedly unhappy with the prospect of early national elections, while they continue to face significant losses in local elections. End Summary.

12. (SUB) West Bengal has a total of 126 municipal bodies governing urban and semi-urban areas. Elections are held for these bodies every five years. In the 13 municipalities holding the latest round of elections, only the CPM lost municipal governments from their control, losing four. The other parties Trinamul Congress, Congress and even the smaller Left allies Forward Bloc (FB) and Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) retained the municipal governments that they previously held or increased their control. CPM lost to the opposition in districts ranging from North Dinajpur (North Bengal) to Burdwan (Central) and North 24 Parganas (South Bengal).

13. (SBU) Although the results occurred in only 13 municipal areas, they are a good indication of public opinion in different regions of West Bengal. While the issue of land acquisition for industry may have driven rural voters away from the Left as evident in the May panchayat polls, Left leaders in the state were shocked by the results in urban and semi-urban areas. These latest results are believed to reflect reaction to the CPM's overall record of poor governance, to include weak education, health care, food distribution and other urban public services.

14. (SBU) The municipal elections setback comes at a bad time for the CPM as at the national level, General Secretary Prakash Karat is threatening to bring down the UPA government should the Congress Party go forward with the Indo-U.S. civil nuclear deal. The last thing that West Bengal's Left leaders now want is early parliamentary elections if the UPA loses its majority. In 2004, the Left had won 35 of West Bengal's 42 parliamentary

seats. At this point, the leaders fear a loss of more than a dozen seats in the parliament's lower house Lok Sabha. According to several contacts with good access to the state CPM leadership, many leaders are upset with Karat's intransigence over the civil-nuclear deal. A well-placed advisor to Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, told ConGen that rumors have been circulating that there was a small chance of Karat's ouster by the WB CPM leadership, though the advisor said that "it was no more than a 10 percent chance." While unlikely that Karat would be pushed out, the mere fact that the rumors exist reflects a significant tension within the CPM and a growing internal lobby against early parliamentary elections.

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